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# *The* STEP LADDER

VOL. 42, No. 1

SUMMER 1958

GALESBURG, ILLINOIS

JULIA ANNA COOK

## HEART'S TENDRIL

When the bright, winter moon moves light and free,  
I look upon its distant fire through lace  
of tendrils on a stark and lonely tree;  
but see within my mind in memory  
a small child's innocent and lovely face,  
Spring moon . . . and apple blossoms . . . in its place.

The daughter, who for nine sweet years was bound  
deep in the fibre of my life, still seems  
to be a living presence in my dreams.  
Her clear voice haunts my days, and words I hear  
in praise of loveliness ring of my dear.  
So much of heartbreak in remembered sound,

so many little ones, the world around!  
Now each small girl I see who's almost nine,  
with bright hair unconfined, and cornflower eyes,  
and air of innocence, and young surmise;  
like a familiar tendril at heart's vine,  
tugs for the lovely child, who once was mine.



BLOODROOT

Bloodroot spilling their juice upon my hands,  
Me digging them in brown earth mould that blends  
The breath of March; me with a flower alift,  
Darting its scent as woodpools show a rift  
Of sky through leaves and fronds: — these make me ponder  
A vision deeper even than bloodroot wonder,  
And make me say, as though another thought it,  
And I, not understanding, only caught it,  
"I'll not forget. I never will forget!"  
What will I not forget? This springtime debt  
Of scent and sight? The earth's deep-rooted purpose?  
Such things send ripples up from any surface.  
But I am vowing never to forget  
Thought's filmy drift, untouched by circumstance,  
Which will not give itself to any sense.

### THREE ON A FLYLEAF

#### (1)

Toss out the bag of tricks. Pronounce as sterile  
Each lover's phrase. Consider the way we bled  
Our hearts out silly. Only at your peril  
Forget not that one word we never said.

#### (2)

What shall I wish you, friend? All these?  
The dawn, good food, the seven seas?  
Sleep's calm, the knowing sigh, quick laughter?  
Or just whatever you go after?

#### (3)

The breathless thanks, the striving pen, the tears,  
Went to who made me fall in love, for years.  
Now that I've reached the age of calm and doubt  
My thanks all go to those who help me out.

THE TAVERN

An awning on the tavern flips and flaps  
In breezes pale and cool as any ale  
That's drunk by men and women cool and pale  
With indoor living. On some sea whitecaps  
Reflect a wind; and in old mountain gaps.  
And in a dingle, in a distant dale  
The fresh new breezes rout the old and stale  
As fast as silence breaks in thunderclaps.

Within the tavern they sit, flabby, slack,  
With everything from morals to hope to spare,  
And cage their living in a lifeless shack,  
And each accepts of life his shrunken share  
Who seeks existence on the endless track  
That leads from worry, and that goes nowhere.

MOON CRY

Some cry for the moon,  
Some attempt to conquer mountain-tops,  
Some seek to salvage treasure down among the dragon fish,  
Some delve into the earth for hidden fruit

But

Whether you cry for the moon, climb mountain-tops  
Send rockets into the stratosphere

Know this —

Add the past that is behind  
With all the new hereafters just ahead  
The sum, or the remainder, equals Nothing  
And this alone is of significance  
The moon cry is the sun that rules your life  
And moon lust is Intangible to you and all.

Before the present void in front of you  
Intangibles have built an altar of delusion  
Eternal, as colors on a butterfly  
Or marking on a deer  
Or blood red fruit of an ancient plum  
Or groves of oleander and hibiscus  
Which grow along the vales of Etna.

You cannot always strive to capture moonbeams  
Or time the moment when the grasshopper will sing,  
Intolerance and stupidity are blood relations  
While genius, gazing past the corridors of opportunity  
Kneels down upon the ground in adoration,  
Prey and victim of a moon lust  
Martyr and high-priest of a Vision.



## THE RAZING

Fire has swept this plot of earth.

Green bursts into flame  
and buds curl to blackened whips  
that scourge places where screams are unheard.  
No mercy blinds the eye  
or numbs the pain —  
pain that darts on wings of birds  
and crawls with salamanders.

Unclench the fist and see where blood is mixed with sweat.  
Watch prayer dry into streaks of dust.

## MIGRATION

The sky was an unnamed gray, and trees hung  
like handles of unpolished pewter.  
Speech trampled the ears and a distant bark  
dittoed into flatness.  
This was the gray that held morning suspended  
dulled the optic nerve  
erased color from the brain.

Then, in a stun of rocketing, in ten thousand darts  
the robins came  
whirring straight to their marks  
feather-targeting to trees.  
Bird talk swelled the air and breath  
charged through the molecules.  
And the sound, oh the yellow-beaked aurora of sound  
that picked the gray to pieces, and burst  
into borealis.



## RENO VACATION

They're off! Vacation starts at the dashboard  
as dials are tuned  
to vanquish mediocrity of miles.  
Open fields are closed to inert minds  
and only blots of billboard stir the eye  
along the sedatives of highway.  
Soon, vast monotony of pine is left behind  
and granite cliffs arouse a throttled impetus  
down the road to neoned paradise,  
Where meadows will be soft in felted green,  
and happiness will dive between roulette  
of days, then paddle down the slot-machined  
and pinballed riverings of night.

Surfeited  
dials are tuned again — toward home —  
inertia left laughing in a clink of coins.  
Granite hums soliloquy in satin.  
Pines no longer rasp the eye.

Now, who would measure meadows of the mind,  
or judge the shades and textures of their green?

MAN IS THE LITTLE HOUR

Man is the little hour  
that land and sky and sea  
have to comprehend what they may be.

Cloud and shell and flower,  
moon and stone and tree  
catch at this slender straw of mortality.

Here, from the blood, the wave, the wind  
consider themselves, undisciplined;  
and groves incarnate in flesh take thought  
to bud, to blossom and to rot.  
Here, from the bone, in sharp surmise  
a star surveys its place in skies;  
a cave, a mountain ponder on  
tides and thunders come and gone.

For cloud and shell and flower  
Man is the slender hour,  
for tree and stone and moon, land, sky and sea,

Between Man's birth and death,  
drawing this little breath,  
all they will ever know of Mortality.

## EVER FINER THE NET

Something within man's mind-soul cries release,  
yet ever finer forebears weave the net  
of memoried prejudice, preconceptions,  
retaliations; thus prohibit peace  
within man's soul. Yet something cries release,  
release from wrongly-bent fealty,  
release from atavistic mores of past,  
from over-arched sentimentality  
amidst for age on end his soul's been cast.  
Nothing can quiet the past-slavish soul  
and wearied to exhaustion, alibis  
as Adam on Eve and Eve on the serpent  
and on and on throughout the centuries.  
Take off his shoulders Past's responsibilities;  
a soul released is a soul that can grow,  
grow and achieve a present fulfillment:  
For solely to the present age he owes  
his indefectible fidelity.

STREET

In New York is an eloquent street  
with six saloons and a green cafe,  
and eventually here  
one may walk and meet  
all ones of his ever coming and going;  
the aging widow with video face,  
a persistent one with a midnight question,  
a little sweet lady in faded lace,  
an old bent man with a withered arm,  
newsboys like dwarf-men, row on row,  
shouting their wares. Here beggars go  
seeking for love, or coins, or grace —  
and tiny girl, frightened, clutches her charm.

Second-hand store with windows of dust  
has second-hand Buddha with fat knowing grin,  
and little girl stares with nose on the pane  
and jangles her emblem; the image within  
secure in cold brass cannot mind — he can find  
a life long in metal. They live until rust —  
emblem and image in second hand store  
while truth turns to dust.

In quiet of rooms off the eloquent street,  
walled off from the widow, sweet lady, and child,  
who seeks for the lost one, timid and true,  
and who are they there on the dark avenue  
who parade for the Buddha, eternally mild?



## PURSUIT

As the salmon swim upstream,  
throwing their speckled lives at fate,  
stone banks, or whirling pool,  
so in my life-time, early, late,  
desire pursues, and as a fool  
I turn again to constant theme,  
knowing the face recedes from me —  
alone, and seeing love as lost,  
not courting any gods within,  
refusing to bribe for palace key,  
I comfort self that time is kind,  
and only saints know how to sin.

JANE BEVERLIN TATE

## MULBERRY TREE (*Garden Show — 1958*)

Wind combed these branches  
over the concealment of fruit  
and children found refuge  
beneath luxuriance of leafage.  
Now in an artificial landscape  
one pale green tree becomes a focal point  
of promise.  
Within a small enclosure  
domed not under blue sky  
but under flood-lights and girders  
spring seems a stranger.

MORNING GLORY

This blossom, far too frail  
To stand the sun's bright glance,  
Meets with a morning breeze  
To do its happy dance  
Before it tucks away  
Its bit of heaven's blue  
When the sun's warm kiss  
Shall rob it of its hue.

But an old gardener,  
As wise as he is kind,  
Gave it a northern wall,  
Against which it reclined.  
Though noon has come and gone  
That morning glory still  
Is fresh as when at dawn  
It graced my window sill.

GREEK TEAR VASE

Empty, it stands behind protecting glass  
 This ancient vase once filled with woman's tears,  
 For crowds to pause and look at or to pass,  
 Emblem of human sorrow down the years,  
 What was the grief that caused those tears to flow,  
 Was it a woman mourning for her child,  
 Feeling the little limbs now cold as snow  
 That once had run in play as free and wild  
 As a young fawn with its unconscious grace?  
 Or were they tears that fell from eyes grown dim  
 With looking long on a dead lover's face  
 That filled the precious vial to the brim?  
 The vase is empty, ancient tears are dry,  
 But grief is timeless — still must women cry.

THE SKY WINDS YOU TO ME

And the sky  
Winds you to me,  
Winds you as I wait  
And love the sky  
And see no stars, moon,  
Or sun, or cloud streak.  
Now sky has beauty  
Wearing you on  
Its long wind finger,  
Her gem (my love).  
I'm no star but sky gazer,  
Trembling like the winds,  
Waiting for the winds.  
Why won't they hurricane,  
Out beat their speeds,  
So I can hold deep breath,  
And open both my eyes  
And see love down to earth.

BUDDHA TIME

Time is a sitting Buddha,  
Who waves a fan  
That whisks, whisks brisk —  
Each pelt of life  
To right or left;  
Wisps hopes,  
Loves, all newborn buds  
To age, age, age and grave.



Why not hold and break that arm,  
So blooms still bloom,  
Beginnings stay?  
Wait! You and I stop then,  
Freeze in joy,  
Or pain.  
All things bas relief?  
No! — Buddha Time, fan on.

GORDON GILSDORF

### SNOW

I shiver beneath a lowering dome of sky  
that is gray and cold as monastery stone,  
and I watch a silent scud of clouds  
shuffle on the barren silted floor  
like a cloister of dark-robed mendicants,  
faceless under cowls.

Snow-laden almoners  
waddle through the rows of naked hills,  
swaddle peaks in seamless robes,  
and pour a cup down the thirsty throat  
of the long valley where I stand.

With pity  
they wrap me in a swirl of chill wind,  
as though I was a ragged clod of dirt  
and could not call this sanctuary mine.

FARM HOUSE VIGIL

The rain frogs dirge through the half-light of dawn  
With their weird lamentations.  
A rooster flaunts his ego  
To the rain-chilled world.

The contours of a tenant farm house,  
Hail-pocked and desolate,  
Sour the countryside.

Upstairs a doctor bends grimly over a bed.  
Sob-torn, the mother stares at the child  
While a caricature of the father slants  
In monstrous outline on the peeling wall.

Like bitter seeds the doctor spits out his words.  
"You should have brought her to me days ago."  
His voice softens.  
"I can do nothing now. She is beyond all help."  
The dirge of the rain frogs  
Mingles with the creaking of the boards  
On the sagging porch.  
The sun opens his Cyclops eye  
And a stranger,  
Whose fingers leave no trace on the doorknob  
Enters the room.

AROUND THE CORNER TO THE MOON  
(*Sapphic Stanzas*)

Hermes, swift one, answer this riddle, kindly  
Answer forthwith: messenger, winged herald,  
Son of great Zeus, mothered of fairest Maia,  
Wherefor are missiles?

String tortoise shell, convene the classic poets:  
Lyric Sappo, epical Homer, Virgil,  
Horace. Let them sing again — ethics, wisdom,  
Piety, courage.

Man alone makes symbols and writes, recording,  
Binding time, past, present, and future. Wherefor  
Nations glow, fade: what is the lesson summed up —  
Learned from such cycles?

Silver ships fly, beamed to a golden wave-length,  
Bearing proud men strutting imagined power:  
Petty kings, gods, piercing celestial ceilings —  
Journeying moonward?

Brother! What green agent insures tomorrow —  
Radar, jets, disks, molecule-blasting assured?  
Hermes, come forth! Eloquence ring out! Answer!  
What alchemy now?

HORACE — ODES — I, 12

Man or half-god, whom do you choose to praise now,  
Clio, with your lyre and your fife's shrill piping?  
Or what god? Whose name will be now repeated,  
Sportively echoed,

Whether heard on Helicon's shaded borders,  
Or on heights of Pindus or frosty Hæmus?  
Whence uprooted forests trailed blindly after  
Orpheus singing;

By his mother's art he delayed the rapid  
Flowing of the streams and the swift-winged breezes,  
Charmed the listening oaks with his strings' sweet music,  
Leading them onward.

Whom now shall I praise before Jove the father,  
He who governs men and the gods in all things,  
Sea and land, the whole of the universe, and  
Changing of seasons?

Whence comes nothing greater than he himself is,  
There is none like him, none to follow closely:  
Next, however, honors should go to Pallas  
Daring in battle;

Nor shall I be silent concerning Bacchus,  
Or Diana hostile to beast, the huntress,  
Neither you, O Phæbus, with well-aimed arrow,  
Certain and fearful.

Hercules I sing, and the sons of Leda:  
One gained fame with horses, the other fighting;  
When their star is sighted by timid sailors,  
Steadily beaming,



From the rocks the wind-shaken spray flows backward,  
Winds die down, and clouds disappear from heaven,  
Threatening waves subside in the placid ocean,  
    Since they have willed it.

After these then, Romulus let me mention,  
Then the reign Pompilius kept so peaceful,  
Tarquin's reign so splendid — I know not — maybe  
    Cato's brave dying.

I shall tell of Regulus and of Scaurus  
Great of spirit, prodigal Paullus also,  
Tell of conquering Hannibal and Fabricus,  
    With lofty singing.

He and unshorn Curius and Camillus,  
All were bred in poverty fierce and cruel,  
Fitting them for war, raised on grandsire's farmland  
    In modest dwelling.

Swells Marcellus' fame like a tree grown ageless;  
'Midst them all the Julian star now flashes  
Like the moon among all the lesser torches,  
    Gleaming eternal.

Father, you who guard still the race of mankind,  
Son of Saturn, now to your care is given  
Cæsar's fortunes; and may you reign forever,  
    With Cæsar second.

He will drive before him the conquered Parthians  
Threatening Latium, in a well-earned triumph,  
Or the subject Seres and Indi, brought from  
    The Eastern border.

Less than you, O Jove, he will reign with justice;  
You will shake Olympus with heavy chariot,  
Hurling down on groves man has desecrated  
    Bolts of your thunders.

HORACE — ODES — IV, 12

Now the comrades of spring, breezes which calm the sea,  
Tranquil currents from Thrace, push out and swell the sails;  
Now the fields are not stiff, nor do the rivers roar,  
Being swollen with winter's snow.

She is building her nest, unhappy bird, mourning  
Itys piteously, she the Cecropian  
Line's eternal reproach, seeing how wickedly  
She once punished the kings' brute lusts.

They that tend the fat sheep sing in the fresh, new grass,  
Sing their songs to the pipe, and they delight the god  
To whom flocks and the dark hills of Arcadia  
Are most pleasing and give him joy.

Now the season brings thirst, yes, my Vergilius;  
But if you long to quaff vintage at Cales pressed,  
You the favorite one, client of noble youths,  
You shall pay for your wine with nard.

Just a small onyx box full of a fragrant oil  
Shall elicit a cask, which in Sulpician vaults  
Now lies — powerful to give new hopes and wash away  
All the bitterness of our cares.

If you haste to these joys, then with your wares come quick;  
Since I do not intend for you to soak yourself  
In my cups with no charge — just as though I were rich  
And at home in a house of wealth.

So have done with delays and with your zeal for gain;  
And rememb'ring the black funeral fires while still  
You may, mingle some brief folly with wisdom now:  
To be foolish is sweet at times.

AMONG THE FLOWERS OF MY SLEEP

Your face among the flowers troubles my sleep.  
I climb the trellises of time and leap  
The thickets of my dream  
To touch your flowering face upon the stem  
Of night, loving the light of your look  
More than your last rebuke  
Of love. O I must risk all  
To keep your image whole  
Among the flowers of my sleep.

THE MIND ASSUMES

It is thought that changes  
The latitude of branches,  
The image frames a haven  
For nightingale or raven.

The landscape in a revery  
Abounds in treachery,  
Such pansy faces, purple blooms  
Only the mind assumes.

This is witchery fantasy forgives:  
Black beetles sifting through fantastic sieves.

SELF-PROJECTION

I walked in solitude —  
coaxed onward by a lazy lane  
stretching itself in a tawny arc  
like a giant Siamese cat.  
Seasonless grass and rain  
had commingled; cliques  
of trees discussed new vogues  
while six mad crows made dark  
remarks connecting fence and sky.  
As I turned the bend  
a yellow hill heaved its bosom,  
tempting my feet.  
I climbed as soft wings passed me by,  
then high at last — star-high,  
looked downward through the furry mist.  
A figure walked in solitude,  
coaxed onward by a lazy lane  
stretching itself in a tawny arc.

PERFECTIONIST

Time, you ancient enemy of dreams —  
Relentless weaver of minutes into years  
Too small for man to wear in comfort, sheathes  
Of decades tighter than the skin he wears;



Time, your winged precision never breaks.  
Won't you drop one year-stitch now and then,  
Or falter with the hour-thread that chokes  
These images our hopes would thrive upon?

Old spinner Time, your loom is all too firm,  
Too perfect, ever merciless and sure —  
Too overzealous — while I, still young and warm,  
Defy you, though respect the power you are.

CRAIG LOVITT

## THE LOUD SILENCE OF MODERN PEACETIME

Item: Navy Flier Crashes  
In Training Flight

He was young, unmarried.  
His bride-to-be was making  
wedding plans when he crashed.  
On the day of his funeral  
the Navy Honor Guard called  
while the body was being taken to the cemetery:  
"We can't make it. Very sorry," said the voice  
at the other end of the line.

He went to his grave  
unmarried.

He went to his grave  
unescorted  
unhonored.

He went to his grave  
untried,  
except in death.

WHAT THE BONES KNOW

*Bury the bones* was the sexton's cry  
As he shoveled them under earth.  
Now they would to God He would not deny  
Their entity other birth.

They plumb the terror of dark and cold,  
The horror of unseen time,  
And sense the apathy of the old  
When the roots of the spring would climb.

Under the earth there are only worms  
To strip them fleshless and white,  
Leaving them lone for uncertain terms  
With never a flash of light.

They would return to the good green sod  
In the warmth of a living sun,  
To sense the sameness of life and God,  
The twain that is always one.

IN SEARCH OF HOME

A silvered river winding through the hills  
Of Time, whose only aim is to return  
Unto the sea, has moved through loam and fern  
Along its journey where enchantment spills

Upon the solitude without the ills  
Of chance. But when this torrent meets a stern  
Inlay of stone, it pauses not to yearn  
For ease, but thunders over grills

Of fate. No precipice defeats its run  
For oceanic peace beyond the crags  
On which it fell from clouds, a refugee

In search of home, nor will it ever shun  
A bouldered curve because the timing drags.  
It seeks until it finds its source: the Sea.

JUST BEFORE SLEEP

Far across the radius  
of circular night,

wading in concentric  
circumferences  
that shiver with light  
from farther earths,

an owl's soft talk  
defines the edges  
of sleeping.

Attar of cedar shadows  
confuses into  
the faint sound of oars  
stroking rhythmically  
in tidal water —

The smallest winds . . .

## RAINBLOW

Starlight is at the mercy  
of the wind's indecision,  
evergreens bow to its hesitations,  
field mice must steer carefully  
among the wild rose bushes  
when summer  
rolls its wind machine.

And the rain,  
still the rain  
slides down tall weeds,  
dents the lake,  
polkadots the dust,  
washes each twig  
for moon reflecting.

Wind and rain,  
rivering in tune  
into time,  
silverplate leaf by leaf  
over any dark shadows,  
to float memory leaves  
in the mind.



RESORT BOY AT TWELVE

Scuffs banana peels and beer cans  
hiking the brown September beach  
where his town swindles tourists ferociously all summer  
to live the rest of the year.

All the blue and yellow vacation  
he fades paler, scouring in the smoky kitchen  
of his dad's hamburger joint. And fall, winter, spring  
he roams faded alleys of the Pier ghost town:  
empty streets of locked doors.

Warped boards are nailed on the cracked grin entrance  
to Crazy House, with the curved mirrors. Barb wire  
wraps the lot where the Ferris Wheel rusts.  
The blistered Fun House gates  
are double bolted, windows shuttered against a peek  
at the lurching stair.

The pony stalls are deserted. 'Gypsy':  
a mangy brush in a corner; rain on the ring  
has erased the shoe prints. Planks block  
the cave to the Tunnel of Love: 10¢ in a rosy heart.  
The ticket booth is falling.

He lives in a dead alley of barred doors.

## MEDITATION WAITING FOR A BUS

As I stood mourning at Third and Broadway, the dwarf  
yelled: Gitcher Latest Races! Tmorra Mornin's Seven-Star Final!  
Nah, y don wan that one, tha's tday's!

Late ones out! Jus off th truck! Waddya read?

. . . hey mac, slow down.

what's happened so important the last five minutes?  
lightning prophet with seven-cent auguries,  
i've heard no news in five years since a dark-hair dancer  
waved me goodbye.

But he bawled at Saturday afternoon,  
Sunday pape! Las Results! Latest Sunday Mornin's!  
Music Liberry? Neva heard of it.

. . . stop, thief,

snatching evening away from my eyes,  
few enough left, and hurrying tomorrow  
that will come too soon.

Gitch Mornin' Editions! Wat's yers, Mister?  
Waddya read? Mother strangles children? Gitcher pape!

. . . o night court teiresias,

gloating on our griefs before we commit them,  
barking today's horrors to frighten innocent tomorrow —  
Sufficient is the evil thereof.

THE YACHT RACE

A sinuous fleet of bright-breast swan  
Sail homeward horizon to port,  
Proud company of birds, now gone  
Full spinnakered in robust sport.

By yachtsman prowess, released grace  
With heads held high against sapphire sky,  
Each swan with skipper in royal race  
West-blown wins dock as firm winds die.

MARY WORD ELLIOTT

SEASON OF AMBER

I remember the quiet that Autumn,  
Brief lull in the windy chime —  
St. Martin's season of amber  
That preserved us, suspended in time.

I remember the incense of burning  
From fires that slowly consumed,  
With the sun now cool in its turning  
Through days when late roses bloomed.

I remember frost spattered in starlets;  
The grey bird that sang by our lake:  
Then the lowering spectre of Winter,  
As fears, that had slept, howled awake.

GROUP THERAPY

This is our world, entrapped by groups; decoyed  
By measured words in meaningless debate,  
Which hour on endless hour resolve our fate,  
Till man in narrowing circle is destroyed.  
In this our world, as metals are allowed,  
Man needs a man, thus welds his own estate  
To live a Titan unincorporate,  
Olympian-born, above the anthropoid.

This is our world, infused with bloodless crowd;  
And like a whited sepulchre where death  
Of individual thought insensate lies,  
Beneath the status quo whose frosted breath  
Wraps it in deep inertia like a shroud,  
While we are standing by with fire-banked eyes.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Julia Anna Cook . . . . .	1	Heart's Tendrils
Hope Stoddard . . . . .	2	Bloodred
	3	Three on a Fly
Samuel M. Sargent . . . . .	4	The Tavern
Annette B. Feldman . . . . .	5	Moonlight
Davina Kosh . . . . .	6	The Razi
	6	Migrations
	7	Reno Vacation
Helen Harrington . . . . .	8	Man Is the Little House
Dorothy Rebentisch . . . . .	9	Ever Finer the More
James Binney . . . . .	10	Streets
	11	Pursuing
Jane Beverlin Tate . . . . .	11	Mulberry Tree
Anna M. Priestley . . . . .	12	Morning Glory
Christina Rainsford . . . . .	13	Greek Tear Vase
Livingston Welsh . . . . .	14	The Sky Winds You to Me
	14	Buddha Time
Gordon Gilsdorf . . . . .	15	Sand
Lucia Trent . . . . .	16	Farm House Vignette
Liboria E. Romano . . . . .	17	Around the Corner to the Moon
Helen Rowe Henze . . . . .	18	Horace — Odes — I, 1
	20	Horace — Odes — IV, 1
Ryah Tumarkin Goodman . . . . .	21	Among the Flowers of My Sleep
	21	The Mind Assumes
Florence A. Dietz . . . . .	22	Self-Projection
	22	Perfection
Craig Lovitt . . . . .	23	The Loud Silence of Modern Peacetime
Alfred Leland Mooney . . . . .	24	What the Bones Know
Margie B. Boswell . . . . .	25	In Search of Happiness
Rachel Graham . . . . .	26	Just Before Sleep
	27	Rainbow
Grove Becker . . . . .	28	Resort Boy at Twelve
	29	Meditation Waiting for a Break
Ada Mary Weaver . . . . .	30	The Yacht Race
Mary Word Elliott . . . . .	30	Season of Ambiguity
Margaret Succop . . . . .	31	Group Therapy





Volume 42 / Number 1